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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001352

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: RELATIONS WITH TURKEY BACK IN THE SPOTLIGHT  
FOLLOWING PRESS REPORTS, BORDER CONFERENCE

1. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

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SUMMARY  
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2. (SBU) The last-minute decision by the Turkish delegation not to attend a conference on regional archaeological and tourism issues, a report in the Armenian press regarding visa regimes and a widely circulated transcript of a Turkish newscast hurled the issue of Turkey-Armenia relations back into the public spotlight June 15-16. The public reaction by Armenian politicians and legislators was relatively quiet. Armenian MFA contacts, however, suggested that they expected an increase in rumors and public debate on the issue in advance of the NATO Summit in Istanbul. End summary.

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GYUMRI-KARS SYMPOSIUM CONTINUES WITHOUT TURKS  
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3. (SBU) Despite the last-minute decision of Turkish participants not to attend the event, the Gyumri-Kars Historic Preservation and Cultural Tourism Symposium was held in Gyumri June 15-16. Organizers originally planned the event as a week-long meeting co-hosted in the communities of Gyumri, Armenia and Kars, Turkey to explore issues of preservation and tourism as they affect local economic development. The symposium was scaled back the prior week due to the failure of the Turkish organizers to obtain "government permission to participate in and co-host the event." Armenian MFA representatives, originally scheduled as part of the seminar, declined to attend the event following the announcement by Turkish organizers. U.S. Ambassador John Ordway opened the session and was joined by representatives of other diplomatic missions accredited to Armenia. USAID financed portions of the event through implementing partner the Academy for Educational Development (AED). Local media reports of the event made reference to the absence of the Turkish side but stopped short of criticizing the GOT decision or casting the seminar as politically charged.

4. (SBU) The Armenian organizers told the Embassy that they still plan to travel to Kars in mid-July as tourists to complete portions of the originally planned program. Their research trip will focus on archaeological preservation issues and applications for regional tourism. (Note: The region was part of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. Archaeologists point to Kars and Gyumri as prime examples of strikingly similar architecture and urban landscapes from the period that are relatively well preserved and have promising applications in the tourism sector. End note).

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NEWSPAPER REPORT ON TURKISH VISAS PANICS MFA, TRAVELLERS  
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5. (SBU) There was considerable speculation around Yerevan June 16 following a newspaper report in local daily Haykakan Zhamanak claiming that the GOT had modified visa procedures for Armenians. According to the article, the GOT would no longer issue visas to Armenians at the airport in Istanbul nor at the Georgia-Turkey border. The article suggested that the GOT was making the move in retaliation for statements made in the U.S. Congress regarding Turkey's role in the events of 1915. Post checked-in early June 16 with the Armenian MFA, which was understandably worried about the report and totally unaware of such a change. The MFA initiated a call to contacts in Ankara on the issue mid-day. The MFA's Turkey Desk Officer reported to us late June 16 that her counterpart in Ankara denied that the MFA had ever made such a statement. The MFA released a statement to the press the evening of June 16 (carried by a majority of news outlets that evening and the next day) stating that there has been no change in procedures for Armenians getting visas at Istanbul airport or at the Georgia/Turkey border.

16. (SBU) Post contacts at Yerevan's Zvartnots Airport report that the Yerevan-Istanbul charter flight and Armavia flight left for Turkey June 16 per normal procedures and loaded with Armenian passengers hoping to secure a visa at the Istanbul airport. While contacts at the airport reported that they were spooked by the June 16 newspaper article, they said that the airline or airport had not been instructed to date to modify their normal procedures for Armenians traveling to Turkey.

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NTV TRANSCRIPT INCITES SPECULATION AMONG POLICYMAKERS  
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17. (SBU) An unofficial translation of a June 16 Turkish NTV-MSNBC television report suggesting that the GOT was making preparations to open a border checkpoint connecting Turkey and Armenia inspired a flurry of working-level consultations within Armenia's MFA in Ankara June 17. According to the article, the Turkish MFA had instructed government agencies to prepare the Akyaka checkpoint for eventual opening prior to the NATO summit in Istanbul. The Armenian MFA was reportedly verifying the information with counterparts in Ankara on June 17 while at the same time fending off calls from local NGOs and reporters looking for a GOAM statement on the issue.

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COMMENT  
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18. (SBU) The recent buzz around Yerevan regarding Armenia-Turkish relations and the series of media reports are reminiscent of the surge in speculation that occurred during the Summer of 2003. One important difference, however, is the effort of local media and analysts to link the timing of these developments or rumored developments to a particular event -- the upcoming Istanbul summit. It appears likely that the trend towards speculation will continue as the Istanbul meeting approaches. The extent to which increased bureaucratic level GOAM-GOT contact will advance their bilateral agenda or merely annoy the two parties remains to be seen. End comment.  
ORDWAY